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Training a New Professional Core for Leadership Roles in Work with Infants, Toddlers and their Families[1]

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Abstract

An experimental interdisciplinary training program was founded at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel to train child care specialists to assume leadership roles in work with the young child and his family. The organization and objectives of the program are described. Follow-up of graduates indicates high rate of employment throughout the country and their involvement in development and leadership in innovative community based programs.

Training a New Professional Core for Leadership Roles in Work with Infants, Toddlers and their Families

Early childhood programs focusing on prevention in areas of mental health, nutrition, health welfare and education, have been designed throughout the world in an attempt to meet children's developmental needs. A large number of studies in recent years have demonstrated the impact which a "quality" educational environment may have on the development of infants, toddlers and young children. (Lazar and Darlington, 1978).

However, evaluation of these programs has highlighted the complexity of the attempt to develop and implement adequately integrated programs. Despite the myriad of issues involved, these studies have indicated that the crucial factors in the success of such "quality" programs are the people who are responsible for them on a day-to-day basis (Hunt 1975).

This factor gains further relevance in Israel where recent statistics show that approximately 70% of the entire population of two year olds in Israel now spend anywhere from 4 to 8 hours daily in group settings outside their homes (many of them in day care centers). At the same time various surveys done in recent years (Livnat 1971; Marcus and Baer 1975) revealed that approximately 70% of the personnel involved in caring for children within day care centers, had no appropriate prior training for the task,

and often had only a minimal educational background (8 years). This figure rises to 90% in rural areas and "development towns". Many of the women who perform these jobs come from underprivileged backgrounds, their professional status is generally low, their pay scale is usually commensurate, working conditions are poor and the idea of career development is often non-existent. These issues are particularly acute for a country that had to absorb within a relatively short period, large waves of immigrants, including many socially and economically disadvantaged families. Early intervention with the very young and their parents in disadvantaged communities may help in dealing with the issue of a growing gap, provided that the manpower is trained to deliver such interventions which will focus on parents as well as children. Quality programs for young children may provide a vehicle for dealing with issues of the social gap, provided that these programs are integrated into services in the community, involve the entire family, and are based on expectations of professional competence (Rosenthal 1980; Becker 1975).

These factors imply the acute need in this country for trained personnel who can develop quality programs for infants and toddlers, work with para professionals and parents, and address the special needs of those within the disadvantaged segments of the population.

An experimental interdisciplinary training program was founded at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel, to prepare specialists to work with the very young child and his family. The organization, objectives, and impact of the program are examined in this paper.

Model of Training

Goals and objectives

While establishing the Schwartz Early Childhood Training Program, the decision was made to focus on "Training the Trainers". These individuals, trained for leadership roles, would then be able to train and supervise other direct care workers, para-professionals and non-professionals, as well as provide guidance for parents. This decision was based on several considerations: (a) In order to introduce the programs needed and upgrade the level and quality of child care in Israel, training should aim at a high level of expertise. (b) Because of the current limitations in the field - high personnel turnover, low status, and budgetary constrictions, it has not been feasible to involve professionals already trained in allied disciplines. (c) The aim of "Training the Trainers", was to introduce a new level of role differentiation within the field of early child care, which had not existed before (Becker 1975). Within the functioning of such a system, use of the knowledge and expertise of the professionally trained worker can be

filtered to a much wider network of direct care workers and para-professionals. (d) It can also upgrade the overall level of the field in terms of standards and status, as university trained individuals assume leadership roles. This focus of the program receives support from those calling for innovations within area of child care and proffesionalization. (Vander Ven, 1975).

Structure

The "Schwartz Graduate Program for Training Directors of Early Childhood Programs for Children and Their Parents in Community Centers" was opened in 1975 at the Hebrew University. It was initially funded by a grant from UNICEF and is now primarily supported by the American Joint Distribution Committee with scholarships from the Ministry of Education.

The organizational framework of the program is based on the joint sponsorship of the School of Education and the School of Social Work, decisions concerning the content of instruction are made by a curriculum committee composed of representatives from both schools who specialize in areas relevant to the program.

The Schwartz Training Program is conducted in one academic year, on a post BA level. The program is composed of three days of academic studies and three days of supervised field work. Special workshops, study trips and seminars are also offered. The interdisciplinary nature of

the program is manifested not only in its organizational structure but is also evident within the content of the curriculum and FW experiences, as well as the composition of its staff members. The program currently awards its graduates a certificate upon satisfactory completion of their course and field work.

Two relatively recent structural developments in the training program are a Resource Center and Continuing Education Program. Both were established as a response to the need of past graduates and other people developing programs for infants and toddlers, for a continuing source of professional and practical materials for use in training of para-professionals, work with parents and with young children. The Resource Center is addressing itself to the specific need for teaching materials (including case material) that are based on the Israeli experience and culture, and the Hebrew language. Along with the increasing recognition of the effectiveness of audio-visual materials for teaching, the center is also developing a growing collection of film strips, slides and video tapes. The Continuing Education program includes courses, group supervision, workshops, day long seminars and study field trips.

Content of Curriculum

The philosophy underlying the content of the program's curriculum has been outlined elsewhere (Rosenthal 1980).

The curriculum draws on aspects of knowledge from the fields of child development, psychology, education, social work and community work.

As a professional training program it attempts to impart knowledge, attitudes and skills in a range of subjects. Academic courses, seminars, small group and individual supervision as well as structured experiences in field work are all integrated to meet a predefined set of curriculum objectives (Rosenthal 1980).

The major focus of the program is in the area of working with infants and toddlers. It includes courses in (a) child development, socialization, behavioral and emotional problems of early childhood, (b) principles of educational programming, (c) issues of programming for the disadvantaged, (d) child welfare services. Students are expected to build competencies in observation, program planning and evaluation of young children.

Another important focus is on the adult caregiver, be it the parent or a para-professional caregiver or home visitor.

In this area, the knowledge base (in areas of family structure, dynamics, adult learning, ethnic differences in attitudes to child rearing), is not as wide and deep as in the area of child development. Greater emphasis is put on developing skills of working with parents, individually and in groups, staff selection, methods of training and supervision.

Students are encouraged to examine and review their attitudes in subjects related to this area.

A third focal area in the program is the community. The emphasis is on developing a set of attitudes that will enable the student to understand programming for children and parents in the wider context of the community support system. Knowledge and skills are limited to the understanding of the functioning of a community, its power structure, sources of strength, etc. and to methods of increasing community involvement, and interorganizational cooperation.

Underlying the development of professional skills in all three areas is the student's organizational competence and his ability to work with other people, as well as general professional conduct (e.g. responsibility, initiative, motivation). This is done mostly within the framework of individual and group supervision (3½ hours per week).

To enable students to develop the required skills and attitudes, each student (depending on background and previous experience) is exposed to a variety of fieldwork experiences. These include, day care centers, community centers, parents' groups, home-start and home day care programs, etc. These programs are typically located in "development towns" or "poor" neighborhoods in the large cities.

Monitoring the Impact

The program has not yet acquired the facilities to scientifically investigate and evaluate its impacts on the

development of children, behavioral patterns of parents and staff in community centers, and attitudes towards childhood programs in the general community in programs run by graduates. To date, only anecdotal information is available on these effects, such as identification and intervention with "at-risk" children, cases of parents who have extended their involvement and have become local community leaders, etc. However, there are some global indices which document the potential impact of the graduates on the field. In July, 1979, a survey was conducted on the first 3 groups of students (50 students) who by that time had been working in the field from anywhere between 1-3 years.

Rate of employment: Of the 50 students who had completed the program, 45 students (90%) were working in the field of early childhood or with parents of young children. The majority were working with the very young child (1-3 years of age), some were working with 3 to 4 year olds, and very few with 4 to 5 year old children. Most of the students were working with "young families", with only 2-3 children. This was being done with the idea of an on-going, long term investment.

Assuming leadership roles: Leadership roles were defined in the survey as roles in which the graduate a) contributed to the development of innovative approaches for or introducing change in method of work with infants, toddlers and their families, b) was involved in teaching, training and

supervising direct-care workers and para-professionals. Within the scope of a leadership role, was the expectation of the development of new program ideas and establishment of high standards for direct child care. It was found that 29 students (65%) were actively engaged in innovative and change-oriented programming and specific manpower training. Training programs stressed staff development, the upgrading of para-professional roles and images of self worth, as well as an investment toward staff stability. A distinctive characteristic of the programs being developed, was the variety of approaches designed to bring about increasing parental involvement in the program and in attaining developmental goals for their children.

A description of the positions held by program graduates highlights the leadership aspect of the roles they assume. Graduates are involved in directing and managing day care centers, ½ day nurseries and organizing educationally oriented "child minding" services. Graduates are an essential component of an experimental family day care project, which trains selected young mothers to care for a group of toddlers (ages 1½ to 2 years) in their own homes. Graduates are developing, writing and adapting teaching materials for parents and para-professional staffs. After acquiring experience in the field, a growing number of graduates have become involved in the supervision and in-service training of para-professional manpower. This

service is being provided in their roles as early childhood coordinators in community centers, and asdirectors and supervisors in day care centers. Graduates are also offering para-professional training within the framework of high school courses and seminars being offered through a variety of organizations.

Job placement and location: The Israel Corporation of Community Centers has been the major spearhead in developing parent-child centers for infants and toddlers. It played a central role in initiating the training program. However, while over 35% of the graduates are working in community center settings, the remainder are working within the framework of 16 different organizations, institutions and public services. These include day care centers of several womens' organizations, government ministries, local or municipal councils, schools of education and other training centers in the field of early childhood education.

The locations of these programs are spread, geographically, throughout the entire country, but are all centered in poor neighborhoods and disadvantaged development towns, or rural areas.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The data on employment of program graduates indicate their potential professional contribution to the field of early childhood in Israel by the provision of direct care and supervision, by program management, and by the

development of new programs that are geared toward the special needs of children and families in various communities and neighborhoods. Graduates are also involved with programs that are designed to enable women to enter the work foce, to meet their needs as mothers, and to provide quality child care in a health promoting and developmentally stimulating environment. The contribution of the graduates to the disadvantaged segments of the population throughout the country is especially related to the program's focus. Their relatively high rate of employment, considering that they are all women of child-bearing age and that no professional "slots" were awaiting them in the field is indicative both of their motivation as well as the genuine need for their services in the field.

The broad range of involvement of the graduates in the field, and the level of their work constitutes a positive model and challenge for those engaged in the care of young children in Israel and elsewhere. Their work attempts to broaden one of the accepted notions that has until now inhibited the development of early childhood care, namely, that a "warm heart and motherly feelings are all that is necessary for a child's development". The model they are providing serves to emphasize that "a warm heart and motherly feelings" are essential to the development of the child, but are by no means sufficient in themselves. Confirming studies in the field (Beker 1975;

Zigler 1971), the activities of program graduates are demonstrating that a professional level of knowledge is required to instruct and aid those involved in the care of children, in order to facilitate the child's optimal development and functioning.

In addition to training students, the program sees itself as a vital factor and stimulus in raising the professional level of all those working in the area of early childhood education and care in Israel. The framework of the Continuing Education Program and Resource Center enables the program to broaden its contribution and influence on the work of other professionals in the field (teachers, social workers, etc.) As a result, it is possible to reach a broader population of children and parents likely to benefit from this professional knowledge.

The main conclusion suggested by the data reviewed supports the initial decision to "train-the-trainers", train for leadership roles.

Future Directions

A need emerges for developing a research component linked to the training program: (a) to evaluate the work of its graduates, (b) to study the comparative effects of variations in methods of care, training and work with parents developed by its graduates.

We have also become aware of the insufficiency of simply a one-year training program. As graduates enter

the field, their need for continuing professional support has become evident. The Continuing Education Program, the Resource Center, and the establishment of an "Alumni Society", were developed to meet these needs.

These findings, as well as on-going feedback from graduates and their employers are considered to be essential components to the program's future development.

Footnotes

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